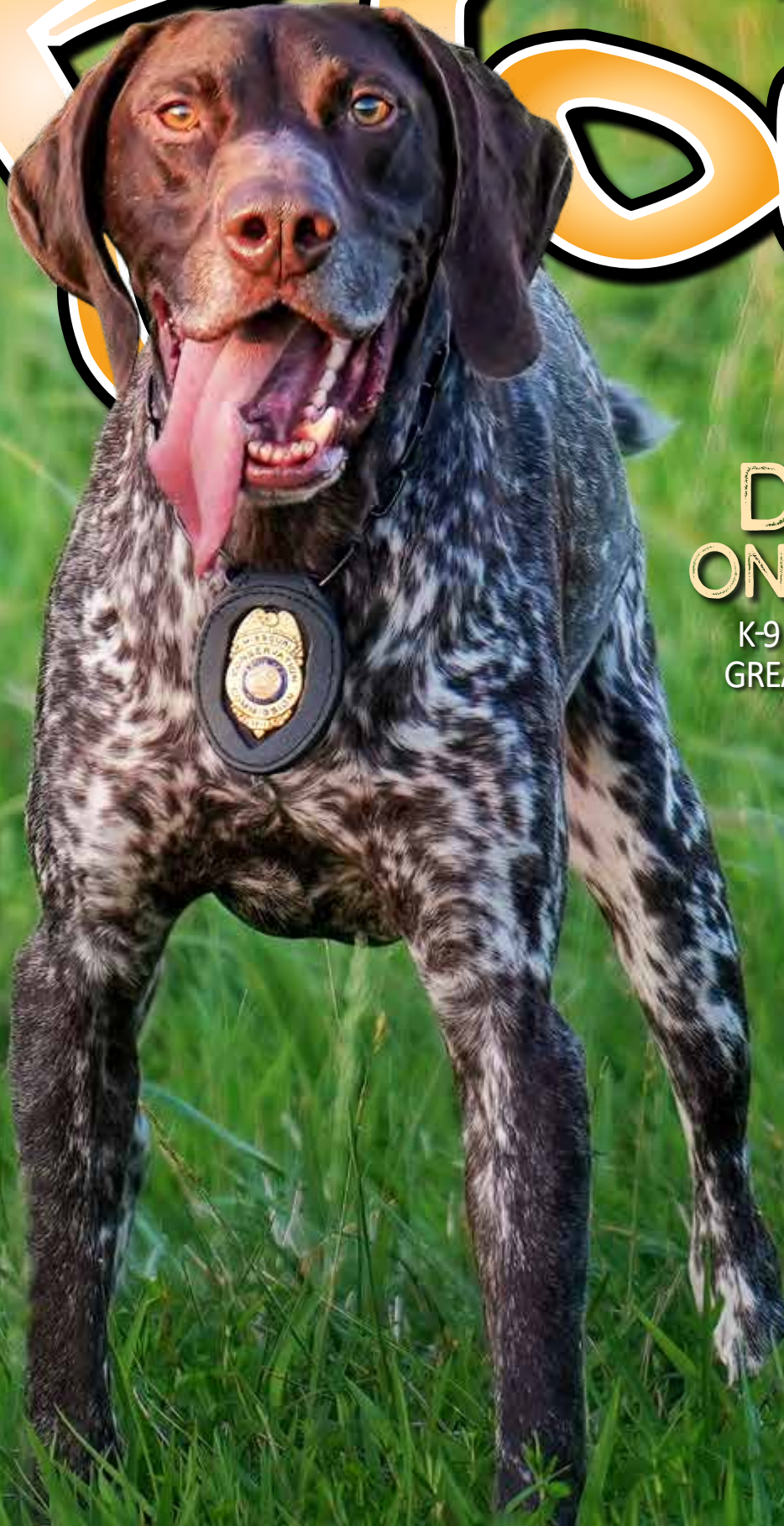




MARCH/APRIL 2026

Xbox



DOGS ON DUTY

K-9 AGENTS MAKE
GREAT DETECTIVES

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These hardworking hounds help their humans solve crimes.

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There's a whole lot of life tucked under a blanket of leaves.

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Pull out this poster and tape it to your wall to make your room look wild.

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Furry, fluffy, and fluttery, a male polyphemus moth rests on a leaf to “sniff” the evening air. To attract a boyfriend, female moths release airborne chemicals called pheromones (*fair-uh-mones*). Using their feathery antennae, males can “smell” a female’s pheromones from over a mile away.



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ON THE COVER

K-9 Agent Cedar
photo by Vince Crawford

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Your guide to all the
UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND **UNBELIEVABLE**
stuff that goes on in nature

Barely bigger than a glue stick, a **SHORT-TAILED SHREW** produces venomous spit that paralyzes small prey like insects, worms, and snails. It also slows down the heart of larger victims like mice and small snakes.



Eating machines: To lay a single egg, a mama **WOOD DUCK** needs to eat more than 300 insects, snails, and other invertebrates per hour for eight hours. Wood ducks usually lay about a dozen eggs each spring.



Give me *shell-ter*! Thanks to a hinge on its bottom shell, a **BOX TURTLE** can tuck its legs and head inside its shell and close it up tight. Box turtles are the only turtles in Missouri that can do this.



Before unleashing its funky fury, a **STRIPED SKUNK** often flares the hairs on its tail like a scared cat, stamps its paws, clicks its teeth, and growls. Sometimes, it even flips into a handstand and walks around.



If a **TIGER BEETLE'S** legs were as long as yours, it could run over 200 miles per hour. At top speeds, the half-inch-long insect's vision becomes blurry, and it must stop for a moment to regain its sight.



To get a girlfriend, a **RUFFED GROUSE** climbs atop a log, puffs out his chest, and flaps his wings. The motion creates a drumlike thumping that can be heard over a quarter of a mile away.



WATER STRIDERS

glide across the water's surface at speeds up to a hundred body lengths per second. To keep up, a human speed skater would have to zip around the ice track at over 400 miles per hour.



WHAT IS IT?

DON'T KNOW? Jump to Page 21 to find out.

- 1 I don't use a paddle to row.
- 2 Instead, I just go with the flow.
- 3 You'll be shocked how big I can grow.
- 4 My size might make you say, "Whoa!"



TWO TRUTHS, ONE LIE

Which fascinating fact is actually a fib?

Answer on Page 21



- 1 A paddlefish's snout detects electrical signals put out by itty-bitty crustaceans, insects, and other animals that drift in the water as plankton.
- 2 Except for its jaw, a paddlefish doesn't contain any bones. Its skeleton is made of cartilage, the stiff-but-bendy tissue found in the tip of your nose.
- 3 Like other plankton-eaters, such as whales, paddlefish grow quite large. The biggest ever caught was 18 feet long and weighed over 5,000 pounds.

HOW TO

HUNT FOR MOREL MUSHROOMS

There's a fungus among us and, wow, does it taste good. In April, mouthwatering morel mushrooms begin popping up on forest floors across Missouri. Searching for them is nature's version of an Easter egg hunt.

WHAT TO BRING

- Lace up a pair of sturdy shoes or hiking boots.
- Wear light-colored long pants to make it easier to spot ticks.
- Spray insect repellent over your legs and arms.
- Bring a bag — maybe two or three if you're feeling lucky — to carry the morels you find. Many mushroom hunters use a mesh bag. They believe this lets the picked mushrooms release spores ("seeds") that will grow into future morels.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Most mushroom hunters search for yellow (aka common) morels, but at least three kinds of morels grow in Missouri. All true morels have a hollow stem with a hollow, oval-shaped cap that looks like a sponge.

Beware! Never ever eat a mushroom unless a grown-up tells you it's safe. Poisonous mushrooms called false morels look similar to true morels. With practice, most people can tell a true morel from a false morel. If you're unsure, slice the mushroom down the center of its long side. True (edible) morels are hollow. False (poisonous) morels have chambers in their stems and caps.

Pro Tip: When you find your first morel, don't pick it! Mark the location with a hat or bandana and look nearby to see if you can spot more. Once you find one morel, it's funny how other ones suddenly become easier to see.



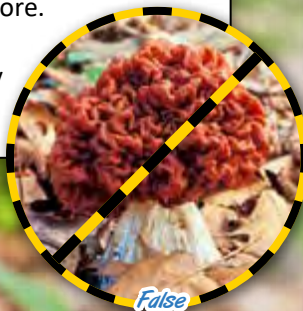
Yellow



Half-free



Black



False



WHERE TO GO

Morels can be found nearly anywhere. Some people have even found them in their flower beds! But morels typically grow in the woods. Here are good places to look:

- Damp woods and river bottoms, especially on sun-dappled, south-facing slopes
- Under dead or dying elm trees
- Under living ash, cottonwood, oak, and hickory trees
- In old, overgrown orchards
- In woods and brushy fields that were recently burned



WHEN TO GO

Morels begin popping up in mid-April. They need warm, damp soil to grow. If you notice these clues, it's time to hit the woods:

- Temperatures (especially at night) stay in the 50s for a few days in a row.
- A warm, gentle rain has soaked the ground. (Search the day after.)
- **Mayapples** are half-grown and shiny green.
- Oak leaves are about as big as a squirrel's ear.

WHAT TO DO WITH THEM

Cut big morels into bite-sized chunks. Soak them in clean water for a couple of hours to flush out any bugs living inside. Gently pat the mushrooms dry on paper towels. Dip them in egg wash and roll them in cornmeal, breadcrumbs, or crushed crackers. Fry the mushrooms in oil until they're golden-brown and then season with salt. Enjoy!



K-9 CASE FILES



These hardworking hounds help their humans solve crimes.

photos by Vince Crawford

The sun was barely up when the conservation agent heard the blast of a shotgun echo off the Ozark hills. A few minutes later, a man walked out of the woods. He was dressed in camouflage, as if he'd been hunting, but he wasn't carrying a shotgun.

It was early April, the weekend of youth turkey season, when only young hunters — 6 to 15 years old — were allowed to bag a gobbler. But the man wasn't young. He had gray hair and looked like he was in his 60s.

The conservation agent suspected the man had shot a turkey illegally. But the agent needed evidence — a gun and a dead turkey — to prove it.

Luckily, he knew just who to call for help ...



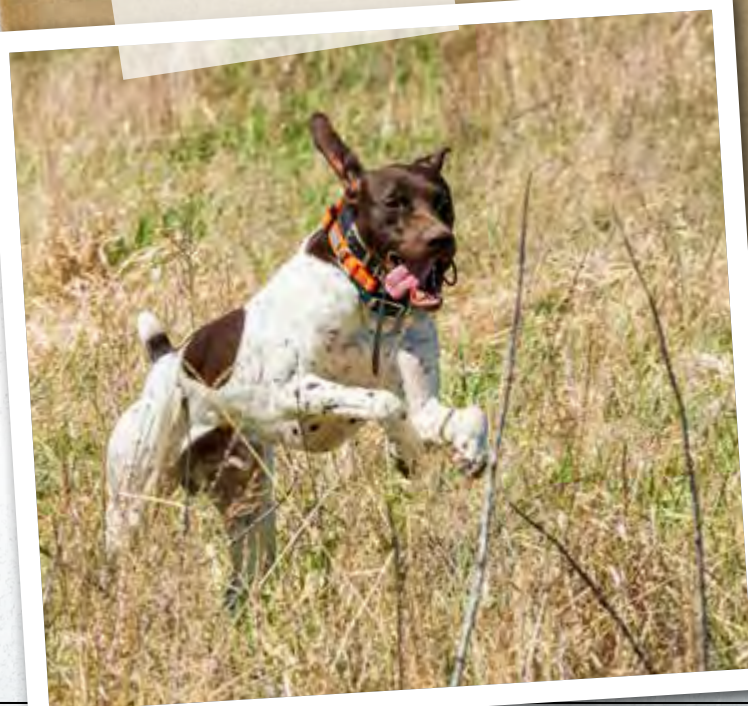
CASE FILE NO. 67 — AGENT TEX



As soon as I jump out of my patrol truck, I can tell — or rather, *smell* — that this is going to be an interesting case. You see, I'm no ordinary conservation agent. For one thing, I'm a lot furrier than other agents. For another, I have four legs. But most importantly, I can smell over 40

times better than any human alive. You see, I'm a German shorthair pointer, and my job is to sniff out evidence.

Together, my partner and I enter the woods. With my nose to the cool, damp ground, I snuffle up scents my partner can't sense. *Sniff!* A cottontail hopped across the trail a few



minutes earlier. *Sniff!* A human walked along this same path. *Sniff!* Oh. That's interesting ... *Sniff!*

I can't help it. When I smell evidence, I become so focused it's almost like I'm hypnotized. That's how my partner finds out I'm onto something. Soon, he sees what my nose already knows.

It's a dead turkey hidden in the brush. It has been shot. Some of the tastiest meat is missing.

My partner tells me, "Good boy!" and gives me scratches and a dog biscuit. I'm so excited. I am a good boy! But I know there's still work to do.

I circle the area around the dead turkey. In no time, I find an empty shotgun shell. Now, where's the gun?

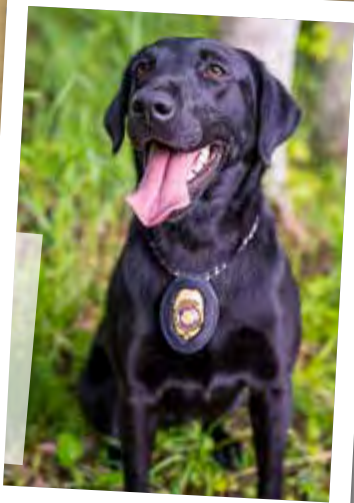
We search for hours and hours. My nose — as strong as it is — starts to wear out. My partner seems tired, too. We decide to call it a day.

As we're walking back to our patrol truck, I catch a whiff of something interesting. My once-tired nose starts working in overdrive again, and back into the brush I go with my partner. There, hidden behind a fallen log, is a shotgun. My partner slides it open. Inside are the same kind of shells that were used to kill the turkey. And even better, lying beside the gun is a zip-top bag full of turkey meat.

Evidence found. Case closed. My reward — a squeaky toy — squeaked.



CASE FILE NO. 311 — AGENT KORRA



Like Tex, I'm a member of the Conservation Department's K-9 Unit. Sniffing out evidence isn't our only job. We also help find lost people and things people have lost. Take this case, for example.

It was a cold winter afternoon when we rolled into the parking lot of a conservation area near Kansas City. A man was standing beside his pickup. I could sense he was upset. He told my partner that he'd dropped his keys while rabbit hunting and was locked out of his truck. It sounded like he needed our help!

One of the man's sons drew a map of where they'd been hunting. This helped my partner know where to search. But that's when things got complicated.

The man and his two sons had walked all over a large brushy, briar-covered area looking for rabbits. Then they had walked all over the same area searching for the lost keys. The whole place was crisscrossed and contaminated with scents. My nose was really confused!

I sniffed and sniffed then sniffed some more. In several places, I found shell casings where the hunters had shot at rabbits. Finally, after almost two hours of searching and 4 miles of walking, I found the keys! They were lying in a clump of grass.

"Good girl!" my partner said. He gave me lots of pets and played tug-of-war with me. (That's my favorite thing to do!)

Keys found. Hunters happy. Case closed.

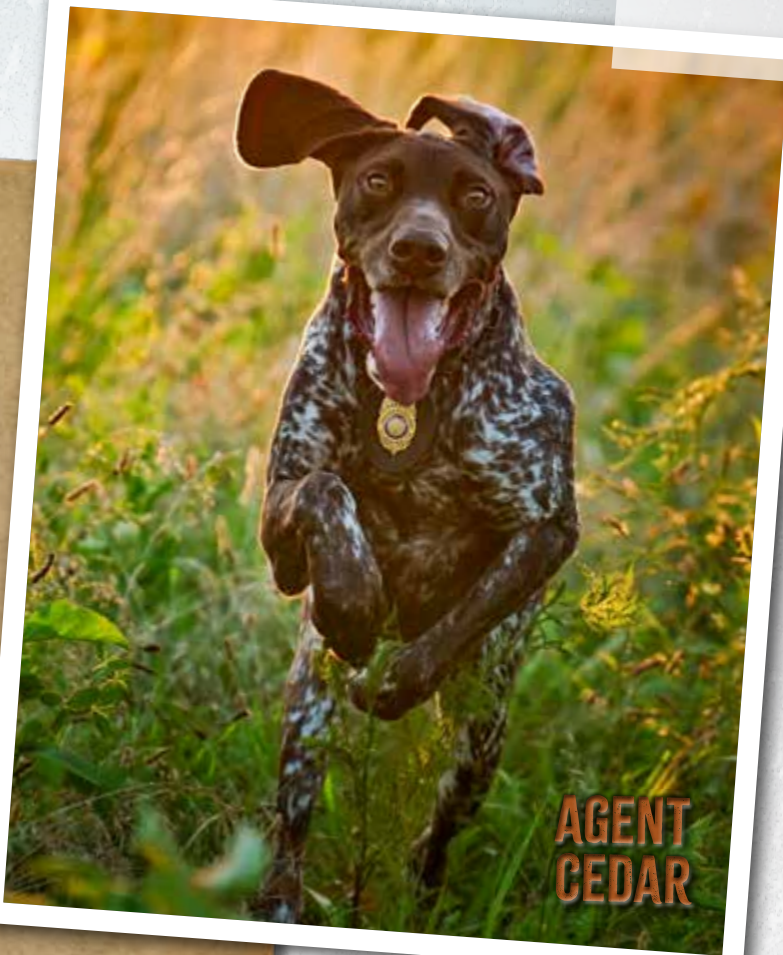
CASE FILE NO. 92 — AGENT ASTRO



It was a sunny September afternoon when my partner parked our patrol truck near a sunflower field in southwest Missouri. Two hunters were waiting for us at the edge of the field. My partner hopped out to talk to them.

Every so often, I heard the booms of shotguns from nearby fields. It was opening weekend of dove season. The hunters told my partner they had seen someone shoot a duck instead of a dove — a big no-no!

Unfortunately, the suspected duck-shooter had left before we arrived. Luckily, the hunters who were talking to my partner



PUPS ON PATROL



The Conservation Department's K-9 Unit has nine dogs stationed across Missouri. Each dog works with a specific human partner, or handler.

Training

Before going on patrol, the dogs and their handlers go through months of training. Some of the training teaches the dogs basic obedience: to sit, stay, and heel. Other training teaches them how to search for evidence.

Duties

K-9 dogs wear badges so people know they're official conservation agents, just like their handlers. Instead of money, the dogs get paid with treats, toys, and pets. K-9 dogs have three basic duties:

- Finding evidence, like guns, shells, or wildlife
- Search and rescue for lost people and objects
- Public programs to show Missourians what they do



had snapped a cellphone photo of the suspect's license plate. We could track down the duck-shooter — if I could track down the dead duck.

To me, smells are like faces. I can tell one person from another just by what they smell like. The same goes for animals. To my sensitive nose, ducks smell different than doves. So it only took a few minutes for me to find the dead duck lying between some sunflowers in the center of the field.

People who break the law don't always do it on purpose. When we tracked down the duck-shooter and my partner told him what he had done, he said he was sorry and took responsibility for his actions. After my partner wrote him a ticket, he even asked if he could have his picture taken with the dog who cracked the case. I tried to smile real big.

Duck found. Snapshot snapped. Case closed.

Off Duty

When they aren't working, K-9 dogs are part of their handler's family. On average, a K-9 dog works for about seven or eight years. After that, they get to retire and live with their handlers.

GRAY TREEFROG

NOW YOU SEE ME. NOW YOU DON'T.

Gray treefrogs change color, turning gravel-gray, bark-brown, or leaf-green to blend in with their surroundings.

SPRING SINGERS

Males sing in the spring to get a girlfriend. To make their musical, birdlike calls sound louder, they inflate a pouch on their throat.

GET A GRIP!

A treefrog's toes cling like suction cups to leaves, tree trunks, and even glass. Sticky mucus gives the frog an even better grip.



WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT

At night, treefrogs prowl the forest canopy, hunting for insects and spiders to eat. During the day, they rest in knotholes and crevices.



LITTER CRITTERS



There's a whole lot of life tucked under a blanket of leaves.

In an Ozark forest no bigger than two football fields, trees drop about 10,000 pounds of leaves every autumn. This layer of discarded tree parts is called leaf litter — but there's nothing trashy about it! Tucked beneath the crunchy brown blanket is a hidden world of fascinating creatures. Biologists have counted over 2,500 insects crawling among the leaves in a space no bigger than a page of this magazine. And that's just insects. Thousands of other creatures — many no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence — share the same space. Some litter critters spend their entire lives tucked out of sight under layers of leaves. Others only visit to nest, rest, hunt, or hide.



MILLIPEDE

For many litter critters, dead leaves are both bed and breakfast. Most millipedes, for example, eat rotting leaves. Their munching helps break the leaves into smaller pieces. These tiny crumbs nourish the soil and provide nutrients to help plants grow — maybe even the tree that dropped the leaves in the first place. “Millipede” means “a thousand feet,” and though a millipede doesn't have quite that many, its army of churning appendages gives it a leg up as it burrows through the leaves.





CENTIPEDE

Centipedes use their sharp fangs to inject venom into insects, spiders, and other small creatures. Many kinds of centipedes live in Missouri, prowling the shadows under leaves, rocks, and logs. Although it's best to observe centipedes from a distance, only a few kinds grow big enough to inflict a painful bite to people who try to pick them up.



EZUME IMAGES / ADOBE STOCK

Millipede or Centipede?

Although millipedes and centipedes look similar, it's easy to tell them apart if you look closely. Millipedes have round bodies, two pairs of legs on most body segments, and move at a leisurely pace. Centipedes have flattened bodies, one pair of legs on each body segment, and generally move quite quickly.





EYED CLICK BEETLE

The big black spots on the back of a click beetle aren't eyes. But they are meant to *look like* eyes to make predators think twice about taking a bite. If the fake eyes fail, a click beetle has another trick. It bends its body into a "U" and then straightens out suddenly with a loud **CLICK!** This flips the insect airborne and startles any critter that was hoping for a beetle bonbon.



LUNA MOTH



Luna moth caterpillars are chunky green eating machines that gobble leaves from several kinds of trees. When a caterpillar has grown about as big as a grown-up's pointy finger, it waddles down the tree and into the leaf litter. There, it weaves a silky cocoon around itself. Often, luna caterpillars fold leaves around their cocoons, which makes them all but invisible in the litter. Caterpillars that are born late in the summer spend winter in their cocoons. In the spring, they emerge as bright and beautiful luna moths.



WOLF SPIDER

Wolf spiders don't build webs. Instead, these athletic insect-eaters run down prey and pounce on top of it like a wolf. Mama wolf spiders even carry their babies on their backs while hunting! Unlike many spiders (which can't see squat), wolf spiders have excellent eyesight, even at night. If you point a flashlight at a wolf spider, you'll see its eyes shining back at you like a tiny, eight-legged cat's.



Give Your Rake a Break

Lots of insects, including many important pollinators, survive winter under a blanket of leaf litter. To make sure you have plenty of luna moths, butterflies, and other insects, don't rake up the leaves in your yard every fall. Instead, leave them on the ground until April.





PILLBUG

Like centipedes and millipedes, pillbugs (aka roly-polies) have more legs than most — seven pairs to be exact. Although they're often mistaken for insects, pillbugs are more closely related to lobsters, crabs, and shrimp. Like their aquatic cousins, they breathe using gills. The gills must be kept moist, or the pillbug will suffocate. That's why they live in dark, damp places, like leaf litter. To keep from drying out — or protect themselves from predators — pillbugs roll up into a tiny armored ball. Sowbugs, which are closely related and look similar, can't roll up.



JOSEPH BERGER, BUGWOOD.ORG

EASTERN HERCULES BEETLE

Hercules beetles are named after a super-strong hero from Greek mythology. And for good reason. The brawny bugs can bench press over 100 times their own weight. If you were that strong, you could easily pick up a pickup. Male beetles push each other around using their rhinoceros-like horns. (Females don't have horns.) The winner of the beetle battle gets more girlfriends.



SPOTTED SALAMANDER

Never play hide-and-seek with a spotted salamander. You'll lose. Although these six-inch-long amphibians are brightly spotted and fairly common in damp forests near shallow ponds and puddles, people rarely see them. That's because they sleep during the day under leaf litter or inside shallow burrows made by mice and shrews. At night, they leave their hidey-holes to hunt for worms, snails, and insects to eat.

LITTLE BROWN SKINK

Rarely stretching more than 5 inches from the tip of its nose to the end of its tail, the little brown skink is Missouri's littlest lizard. Because they're so small, it's usually easier to hear them than see them. They make quite a ruckus as they rustle through leaf litter, hunting for insects, spiders, and earthworms. If a predator grabs a skink by the tail, the lizard leaves its behind behind. By flexing special muscles, the tail snaps off and blood vessels squeeze shut. The tail twitches, which distracts the predator and allows the shortened skink to slink to safety.



SHORT-TAILED SHREW

Tiny but mighty, short-tailed shrews have larger-than-life attitudes and appetites. They hunt day and night, rarely stopping to rest, prowling a maze of tunnels just below the leaf litter. To fuel this almost constant activity, a shrew must eat half its weight in insects, earthworms, and snails every day. Since it spends so much time in pitch-black tunnels, a shrew's eyes aren't much use. To find its way, it lets out a burst of high-pitched squeaks. These echo off the walls and paint a picture in the shrew's tiny brain of the tunnel's size and shape.





THREE-TOED BOX TURTLE

After a long day of hauling its heavy shell across the forest, a tired box turtle snuggles underneath a blanket of leaves to get some shut-eye. There, its hard brown shell keeps it hidden and protected until morning. In the fall, box turtles dig shallow holes, crawl inside, and become buried by falling leaves. Although the holes are rarely deep, antifreeze in a turtle's blood keeps it from turning into a *turtlesicle* during winter.



EASTERN RED BAT

Not all bats sleep in caves. Red bats hang out in trees — literally. After a long night of bug busting, a sleepy bat finds a branch and dangles upside down. When the wind blows, the little bat twists and flutters like a dead leaf. But that's not the only connection this moth-muncher has with leaves. In the fall, most red bats migrate south to spend winter where it's warmer. But a few stick around. On chilly winter nights, you'll find them snuggled under a blanket of leaves, happily huddled up with the rest of the litter critters.



XPLOR MORE

DO A DOUBLE TAKE

Nature is always changing. The forest, prairie, or stream you explore today will look much different than the same one you explore tomorrow. Animals move around, babies are born, unlucky critters get eaten. Plants grow, bloom, make seeds, drop leaves. Sometimes, it's easy to spot these changes. Other times, you notice them only if you look closely.





Instructions

Look at the two photos below. What has changed in the photo on the right compared to the one on the left? Can you spot all 12 things that are different?

ANSWERS

To pinpoint changes in the photo below, the answer key uses letters (on the left) and numbers (on the top). A1, for example, refers to the top left area of the photo.

- A1 - An eastern screech-owl hides in a tree cavity.
- A1 - The white-breasted nuthatch has flown away.
- A4 - Spring beauty blooms on the hillside.
- A5 - A red-bellied woodpecker replaces the red-headed woodpecker.
- A6 - An eastern copperhead slithers in the leaves.
- B1 - A muskrat walks along the stream bank.
- B2 - A tree has fallen across the stream.
- C3 - A school of bleeding shiners swims in the stream.
- C4 - The red-eared slider disappears from the tree root.
- C5 - A twelve-spotted skimmer (a type of dragonfly) perches on the tree root.
- D5 - The northern watersnake has slithered away.



GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO
AND GREAT PLACES
TO DISCOVER NATURE



In April, search wooded slopes along streams for **DUTCHMAN'S BREECHES**. It's easy to see how these frilly little flowers get their name. They look like tiny pairs of white pants hanging from a clothesline.

The oozy mud and mucky water of a marsh is jam-packed with aquatic insects, worms, and snails. In April, **SHOREBIRDS MAKE PIT STOPS** at mudflats to slurp up this "swamp soup" and refuel during their long-distance migrations. Pack a pair of binoculars and head to a wetland to see how many kinds of shorebirds you can spot skittering across the mud.

Set your alarm extra early for Tuesday, March 3. Around 5 a.m., Earth's shadow will fall across the full moon, creating an **ECLIPSE**. This will cause the moon to turn eerily red, a phase known as a "blood moon."



American goldfinch



Indigo bunting



At the end of March, **NINE-BANDED ARMADILLOS HAVE BABIES**. Mama 'dillos always give birth to four — no more, no fewer — identical babies, either all boys or all girls. The babies are born without armor and don't leave the safety of mom's burrow until they're about 3 weeks old.

Watch birds and maybe even win prizes during the **2026 MISSOURI BIRDING CHALLENGE!** Get a team together and see how many feathered friends you can spot from May 1–22.

Participants who submit the birds they've seen will be entered into a drawing for prizes like binoculars. Registration is open April 1–30. Get details at mdc.mo.gov/MOBirdingchallenge.



Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Find out about Discover Nature programs in your area at mdc.mo.gov/events.



WHAT IS IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —



PADDLEFISH

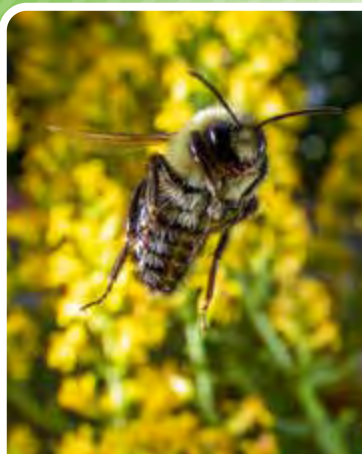
In spring, mama paddlefish lay eggs on gravel bars in rivers. Each mom lays up to 200,000 tiny black eggs, which stick to rocks. Baby paddlefish hatch in nine days, and it takes about three weeks for them to grow their namesake snouts. Dams keep paddlefish from swimming upstream to spawn, so many in Missouri are grown in hatcheries. Paddlefish can live over 30 years, grow over 7 feet, and weigh over 150 pounds.

GO FIND IT!



Cut out this critter card and take it with you outside.
How many of the things on the card can you find?

BUMBLEBEE



BEE TOUGH

Queen bumblebees generate heat by buzzing their wing muscles, and their large size helps protect them from cold March weather.

PACKING POLLEN

Pollen collects on a bumblebee's fuzzy body as it forages. Female bees push the pollen into "baskets" on their hind legs.

WHAT'S ALL THE BUZZ ABOUT?

Sometimes, a bumblebee clamps down on a flower and flexes its flight muscles. This creates a whining buzz that shakes pollen loose.

HOME SWEET HOLE

Bumblebees often nest in abandoned rodent burrows. They also nest in brush piles, birdhouses, and tree cavities.

COLONY CAREERS

In a bumblebee colony, the queen lays eggs, female workers gather pollen, and male drones mate with the queen.

To subscribe, cancel your subscription,
or update your address, visit
mdc.mo.gov/xplor.

FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

GO FIND IT!

About six kinds of bumblebees are commonly found in Missouri. Look for them at flowers from March through October. For more on these fuzzy flower farmers, buzz over to mdc.mo.gov/field-guide.



BUMBLEBEE